

Painting

Chapter 5



Realism

Scale 1: 19,500,000
Lambert Conformal Conic Projection,
standard parallels 40°N and 56°N

0 300 Kilometers
0 300 Miles

Realism

Show me an angel and I will paint one.
Gustave Courbet

Realism in the visual arts is a style that depicts the actuality of what the eyes can see. The term is used in different senses in art history; it may mean the same as illusionism¹, depicting subjects as close to life as possible, or may mean an emphasis on the actuality of subjects, depicting them without idealization, and not omitting their sordid² aspects. Works may be realist in either of these senses, or both. Use of the two senses can be confusing, but depending on context the second sense is perhaps more common.

Realism as a tendency in 19th century art was related to similar movements in the theatre, literature and opera. All emphasized the depiction of everyday subjects, but by no means always discarding classical, Romantic or sentimental approaches to their treatment. The movement began in the 1850s in



France. One of Gustave Courbet's most important works is *A Burial at Ornans*, 1849-1850, a canvas recording an event which he witnessed in September 1848. Courbet's painting of the funeral of his grand uncle became the first grand statement of the Realist style.

Confused yet? So Realism can mean three things in all.

1. realism-the simulation of something in a way that accurately resembles real things
2. realism- the lifelike representation of people and the world, without idealization
3. or Realism- the 19th century art movement that tried to represent people and the world without idealization

For the sake of this class, we will be talking about Realism, as in the 19th Century art movement that tried to represent people and the world without idealization

The second half of the 19th century has been called the positivist³ age. It was an age of faith in all knowledge which would derive from science and scientific objective methods which could solve all human problems.

¹ **Illusionism**- the use of pictorial techniques to create illusions

² **Sordid**- nasty, demonstrating the worst aspects of human nature; squalid, dirty or depressing

³ **Positivism**- the theory that knowledge can be acquired only through direct observation and experimentation, and not through metaphysics or theology

In the visual arts this spirit is most obvious in the widespread rejection of Romantic subjectivism and imagination in favor of Realism - the accurate and apparently objective description of the ordinary, observable world, a change especially evident in painting. Positivist thinking is evident in the full range of artistic developments after 1850- from the introduction of



realistic elements into academic art, from the emphasis on the phenomenon of light, to the development of photography and the application of new technologies in architecture and constructions.

What this means is that, in the 19th Century, art was created in the Romantic style. (Romantic does not mean *love* in art. It means that it was created in a way that was highly dramatic, highly emotional, with strong diagonal compositions. The subjects of Romantic paintings were mythological stories from Greece or

Rome, or were highly scandalous current events. The goal was to create an emotional reaction in the viewer.) About the middle of the 19th Century though, people became tired of art that was created in this fashion and started to create art that showed the world as it actually was. They wanted to show how light moved across the surface of objects, and wanted to show the condition of the world as it was.

Realism sets as a goal not imitating past artistic achievements but the truthful and accurate depiction of the models that nature and contemporary life offer to the artist. The artificiality of both the Classicism and Romanticism in the academic art was unanimously rejected. The new idea was that ordinary people and everyday activities are worthy subjects for art. Realists attempted to portray the lives, appearances, problems, customs, and mores of the middle and lower classes, of the unexceptional, the ordinary, the humble, and the unadorned. They set themselves conscientiously to reproduce all to that point ignored aspects of contemporary life and society - its mental attitudes, physical settings, and material conditions.

Realism in France appears after the 1848 Revolution. In France it expresses a taste for democracy. At the same time in England artists - Realists came before the public with the reaction against the Victorian materialism and the conventions of the Royal Academy in London.



We recognize a few Realism schools of painting:

The Realists (1800 - 1899)

This is a group of international artists in Paris which begin to devise new methods of pictorial representation. They are focused on scientific concepts of vision and the study of optical effects of

light. The Realists express both a taste for democracy and rejection of the inherent old artistic tradition. The Realists felt that painters should work from the life round them. Indisputable honest, the Realists desecrated rules of artistic propriety with their new realistic portrayals of modern life. Artists: Marie Rosalie Bonheur, John Singleton Copley, Gustave Courbet, Honoré Daumier, Hilaire Germain Edgar Degas, Thomas Eakins, Ignace Henri Theodore Fantin-Latour, Wilhelm Leibl, Edouard Manet.

Barbizon School (1840s - 1850s)

Barbizon School was a group of French landscape artists one of first formed outside the Academy. They were named after the Forest of Fontebrau near the village of Barbizon where they got away from the revolutionary Paris to produce their art. They attempted to paint nature directly; Constable who pioneered in making landscape painting a faithful depiction of nature was their model.

The Barbizon painters helped establish landscape and motif of country life as vital subjects for French artists. They also cherished an interest in visible reality, which became increasingly important to the later artistic styles. Artists in the group: Camille Corot, Charles-François Daubigny, Jean-François Millet, Pierre-Etienne-Théodore Rousseau.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (1848 - late 19th Century)

In 1848 a group of English painters, poets and critics formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to reform art by rejecting practices of contemporary academic British Art. They have been considered the first avant-garde movement in art. They accepted the doctrine of imitation of nature, as central purpose of art. Instead of the Raphaelesque conventions taught at the Royal Academy, their central doctrine was that artists should seek to represent the natural world. They believed that the only great art was before high renaissance, before Raphael. He was representative of the time when painters would scarify the reality of the subject to their own ideals of beauty and morality. The Pre-Raphaelite Brothers condemned this art of idealization, and promoted works based on real landscapes and models, and paid intense attention to accuracy of detail and color. They advocated as well a moral approach to art, in keeping with a long British tradition established by Hogarth. The combination of didacticism and realism characterized the first phase of the movement. The landscape compositions were painted outdoors, what was an innovative approach at the time.

Winslow Homer - Great American landscape painter

Winslow Homer was an American landscape painter and printmaker, best known for his marine subjects. He is considered one of the foremost painters in 19th century America and a preeminent figure in American art.

Largely self-taught, Homer began his career working as a commercial illustrator. He subsequently took up oil painting and produced major studio works characterized by the weight and





density he exploited from the medium. He also worked extensively in watercolor, creating a fluid and prolific body of work, primarily chronicling his working vacations.

"You will see, in the future I will live by my watercolors," Homer once remarked, and he was almost right. He came to the medium late: he was thirty-seven and a mature artist. A distinct air of the Salon, of the desire for a "major" utterance that leads to an overworked surface, clings to some of the early watercolors-in

particular, the oil paintings of fisher folk he did during a twenty-month stay in the northern English coastal village of Cullercoats in 1881-82. Those robust girls, simple, natural, wind beaten and enduring, planted in big boots with arms akimbo against the planes of sea, rock and sky, are also images of a kind of moralizing earnestness that was common in French Salon art a century ago. Idealizations of the peasant, reflecting an anxiety that folk culture was being annihilated by the gravitational field of the city, were the stock of dozens of painters like Jules Breton, Jules Bastien-Lepage and Jean-François Millet. Homer's own America had its anxieties too-immense ones. Nothing in its cultural history is more striking than the virtual absence of any mention of the central American trauma of the nineteenth century, the Civil War, from painting. Its fratricidal miseries were left to writers (Walt Whitman, Stephen Crane) to explore, and to photographers. But painting served as a way of oblivion-of reconstructing an idealized innocence. Thus, as Cooper points out, Homer's 1870s watercolors of farm children and bucolic courtships try to memorialize the halcyon days of the 1850s; the children gazing raptly at the blue horizon in *Three Boys on the Shore*, their backs forming a shallow arch, are in a sense this lost America. None of this prevented Homer's contemporaries from seeing such works as unvarnished and in some ways disagreeable truth. "Barbarously simple," thought Henry James. "He has chosen the least pictorial features of the least pictorial range of scenery and civilization as if they were every inch as good as Capri or Tangier; and, to reward his audacity, he has incontestably succeeded."

After exhibiting at the National Academy of Design, Homer finally traveled to Paris, France in 1867 where he remained for a year. He did not study formally but he practiced landscape painting, depicting scenes of Parisian life. Homer painted about a dozen small paintings during the stay. Although he arrived in France at a time of new fashions in art, Homer's main subject for his paintings was peasant life, showing more of an alignment with the established French Barbizon school and the artist Millet than with newer artists Manet and Courbet. Though his interest in depicting natural light parallels that of the early impressionists, there is no evidence of direct influence as he was already a plein-air⁴ painter in America and had already evolved a

⁴ Or Open-air: relating to or in the style of the French impressionist painters who sought to capture effects of light and atmosphere by completing their work out of doors

personal style which was much closer to Manet than Monet. Unfortunately, Homer was very private about his personal life and his methods (even denying his first biographer any personal information or commentary), but his stance was clearly one of independence of style and a devotion to American subjects. As his fellow artist Eugene Benson wrote, Homer believed that artists "should never look at pictures" but should "stutter in a language of their own."



Throughout the 1870s, Homer continued painting mostly rural or idyllic scenes of farm life, children playing, and young adults courting, including *Country School* (1871) and *The Morning Bell* (1872). In 1875, Homer quit working as a commercial illustrator and vowed to survive on his paintings and watercolors alone. Despite his excellent critical reputation, his finances continued to remain precarious. His popular 1872 painting *Snap-the-Whip* was exhibited at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as was one of his finest and most famous paintings *Breezing Up* (1876). Of his work at this time, Henry James wrote:

"We frankly confess that we detest his subjects...he has chosen the least pictorial range of scenery and civilization; he has resolutely treated them as if they *were* pictorial...and, to reward his audacity, he has incontestably succeeded."

Homer started painting with watercolors on a regular basis in 1873 during a summer stay in Gloucester, Massachusetts. From the beginning, his technique was natural, fluid and confident, demonstrating his innate talent for a difficult medium. His impact would be revolutionary. Here, again, the critics were puzzled at first, "A child with an ink bottle could not have done worse." Another critic said that Homer



"made a sudden and desperate plunge into water color painting". But his watercolors proved popular and enduring, and sold more readily, improving his financial condition considerably. They varied from highly detailed (*Blackboard* – 1877) to broadly impressionistic (*Schooner at Sunset* – 1880). Some watercolors were made as preparatory sketches for oil paintings (as for "Breezing Up") and some as finished works in themselves. Thereafter, he seldom traveled without paper, brushes and water based paints.

As a result of disappointments with women or from some other emotional turmoil, Homer became reclusive in the late 1870s, no longer enjoying urban social life and living instead in Gloucester. For a while, he even lived in secluded Eastern Point Lighthouse (with the keeper's family). In re-establishing his love of the sea, Homer found a rich source of themes while closely observing the fishermen, the sea, and the marine weather. After 1880, he rarely featured genteel women at leisure, focusing instead on working women.

Back in the U.S. in November 1882, Homer showed his English watercolors in New York. Critics noticed the change in style at once, "He is a very different Homer from the one we knew in days gone by", now his pictures "touch a far higher plane...They are works of High Art." Homer's women were no longer "dolls who flaunt their millinery" but "sturdy, fearless, fit wives and mothers of men" who are fully capable of enduring the forces and vagaries of nature along side their men.



In 1883, Homer moved to Prouts Neck, Maine (in Scarborough) and lived at his family's estate in the remodeled carriage house just seventy-five feet from the ocean. During the rest of the mid-1880s, Homer painted his monumental sea scenes. In *Undertow* (1886), depicting the dramatic rescue of two female bathers by two male lifeguards, Homer's figures "have the weight and authority of classical figures". In *Eight Bells* (1886), two

sailors carefully take their bearings on deck, calmly appraising their position and by extension, their relationship with the sea; they are confident in their seamanship but respectful of the forces before them. Other notable paintings among these dramatic struggle-with-nature images are *Banks Fisherman*, *The Gulf Stream*, *Rum Cay*, *Mending the Nets*, and *Searchlight*, *Harbor Entrance*, *Santiago de Cuba*. Some of these he repeated as etchings.

At fifty years of age, Homer had become a "Yankee Robinson Crusoe, cloistered on his art island" and "a hermit with a brush". These paintings established Homer, as the *New York Evening Post* wrote, "in a place by himself as the most original and one of the strongest of American painters." But despite his critical recognition, Homer's work never achieved the popularity of traditional Salon pictures or of the flattering portraits by John Singer Sargent. Many of the sea pictures took years to sell and *Undertow* only earned him \$400.



Additionally, Homer found inspiration in a number of summer trips to the North Woods Club, near the hamlet of Minerva, New York in the Adirondack Mountains. It was on these fishing vacations that he experimented freely with the watercolor medium, producing works of the utmost vigor and subtlety, hymns to solitude, nature, and to outdoor life.

Homer doesn't shrink from the savagery of blood sports nor the struggle for survival. The color

effects are boldly and facilely applied. In terms of quality and invention, Homer's achievements as a watercolorist are unparalleled: "Homer had used his singular vision and manner of painting to create a body of work that has not been matched."

By 1900, Homer finally reached financial stability, as his paintings fetched good prices from museums and he began to receive rents from real estate properties. He also became free of the responsibilities of caring for his father who had died two years earlier. Homer continued producing excellent watercolors, mostly on trips to Canada and the Caribbean. Other late works



include sporting scenes such as *Right and Left*, as well as seascapes absent of human figures, mostly of waves crashing against rocks in varying light. In his last decade, he at times followed the advice he gave a student artist in 1907, "Leave rocks for your old age—they're easy".

Homer died in 1910 at the age of 74 in his Prouts Neck studio.

Homer never taught in a school or privately, as did Thomas Eakins, but his works strongly

influenced succeeding generations of American painters for their direct and energetic interpretation of man's stoic relationship to an often neutral and sometimes harsh wilderness. Robert Henri called Homer's work an "integrity of nature."

American illustrator and teacher Howard Pyle revered Homer and encouraged his students to study him. His student and fellow illustrator, N. C. Wyeth (and through him Andrew Wyeth and Jamie Wyeth), shared the influence and appreciation, even following Homer to Maine for inspiration. The elder Wyeth's respect for his antecedent was "intense and absolute," and can be observed in his early work *Mowing* (1907). Perhaps Homer's austere individualism is best captured in his admonition to artists:

"Look at nature, work independently, and solve your own problems."

Realism Questions

1. Realism can mean three things. What are they?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
2. How are they different?
3. How could you obtain knowledge in the end of the 19th Century? (How was it believed that people could learn?)
4. What was the goal of Romantic art? (What did the Romantic artists try to accomplish?)
5. How was Realism different from Romanticism?
6. What was the goal of Realist art?(page 2 paragraph 3)
7. There were several schools or groups of Realist arts. Who were they?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
8. What did the Realists (the French school of painters- page 2 last paragraph) try to accomplish with their art?
9. What did the Barbizon School try to accomplish?
10. What subject matter was important to the Barbizon school?
11. What did the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood try to accomplish?
12. Where did they get their unusual name?
13. Who was Winslow Homer?
14. What medium did is he most famous for using?
15. American artists, including Winslow Homer, largely avoided a certain topic in their art. What was it and why did they avoid it?
16. What were the subjects of Winslow Homer's art during his trip to France?
17. When did he begin working in watercolors?
18. What was the critical reaction to his watercolors? What was the popular reaction?
19. After moving to Massachusetts and later to Maine, Winslow Homer became famous for his watercolors of a certain subject. What was it? (bottom of page 5)
20. How did he influence later artists?
21. What statement best summarizes Winslow Homer's life philosophy?